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Shaping the Avant-Garde: The Reception of Soviet Constructivism by the American Art Journal *October*

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Abstract and Keywords

Soviet Constructivism is a central reference for the American art journal *October* (founded in 1976 and still in print today). This article discusses the ways in which *October* refers to that historical art movement, while overlooking some of its key political aspirations. Especially during the journal's founding years, the discursive association with Soviet Constructivism served to bestow criticality, urgency, and sociopolitical relevance on the American art journal. Furthermore, with the reference to Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, in particular, the *October* protagonists have positioned themselves in a specific manner within mid-1970s art critical discourse in the United States. In addition to framing and positioning, the article examines how Soviet Constructivism (alongside Dadaism and Surrealism) becomes for *October* a key reference for rooting and evaluating the expanded, cross-genre art production post-1945 historically.

Keywords: October, self-representation, Constructivism, Sergei Eisenstein, Dziga Vertov, neoliberalism, art criticism, art journal, United States

In 1976, the film critic Annette Michelson, the art historian Rosalind Krauss, and the artist Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe founded the art journal *October*. The New York–based journal, which is still in print today, has had a canonical impact on the discipline of art history in the United States. *October* did not only offer a new type of art-historical writing but also enforced certain art-historical narratives, setting a benchmark for scholarly work until today.

At its outset in the late 1970s, *October* was one of the first art journals in the United States that was devoted to the then-upcoming French structuralism and poststructuralism (Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan) alongside debates on film, video, and photography (see Figure 1). In the literature, the *October* approach is usually characterized as a postmodern one.[1] With this in mind, it is remarkable and even surprising to find the journal named in reference to one of the defining events in the history of communist movements, the Russian Revolution of 1917, echoing Sergei

Eisenstein's film *October* (1927), which itself was a commissioned work for the tenth anniversary of the revolution. The name *October* suggests that we are dealing with a somehow communist publication and that something revolutionary is happening in this journal. Yet a closer look at the thematic focus of *October* does not confirm this first impression. Soviet Constructivism is only occasionally the subject of in-depth discussion. And *October* is also not interested in an analysis of the specific ways in which Constructivism was involved in the sociopolitical processes of the time.

The reference to postrevolutionary Russia becomes even more surprising when we compare the journal *October* to similar publication projects in the United States in the 1970s. For instance, *October*'s architectural sister-journal, *Oppositions*, published from 1973 to 1984,[2] while invoking a notion of antagonism or struggle in its title, was careful to do so without any explicit historical or political reference. Similarly, *Semiotext(e)*, the independent publisher and journal founded in 1974, unlike *October*, made its reference to French theory explicit.

Figure 1 *October*, Vol. 1 (Spring 1976). Cover.

Now, the question arises why the founding editors were so attracted to the Russian Revolution and, by implication, the Soviet avant-garde that they subsequently named their journal *October*? What did it mean in 1976, in what was still a Cold War ambience, to name a journal based in New York after the Russian Revolution? How does this revolutionary rhetoric go together with a postmodern aspiration? And, furthermore, why, of all the various artistic approaches emerging in the period after the October Revolution, was Constructivism, in particular, of such great interest to the founders of *October*?

I would like to propose that Soviet Constructivism essentially serves two functions for *October*. First, Soviet Constructivism serves the purpose of projecting a certain image for the new art journal. By referencing Soviet Constructivism, the founders of *October* bestow criticality, urgency, and sociopolitical relevance on their journal and the discourse they pursue. At the same time, the choice specifically of Soviet Constructivism for the symbolic framing of the new journal aims at a strategic positioning in its discursive environment (i.e., contemporary art criticism in the United States). The second function of Soviet Constructivism for *October* concerns the way in which the editors write about this artistic movement. The analysis of works of Soviet Constructivism is deliberately integrated into a developmental history and, in the process, used to substantiate particular art historical narratives. Or, to be more precise, the historical art movement (alongside Dadaism and Surrealism, in particular) becomes a key point of reference in providing a critical underpinning and reading of an expanded, cross-genre art production post-1945. The reference serves to establish an "ideological" pedigree for postmodern art in the West—geographically, *October* is largely confined to Europe and North America. In terms of visual culture, *October*'s reference to Soviet Constructivism is even more telling, considering the fact that visual material from the early postrevolutionary Soviet Union was being appropriated. Particularly emblematic elements were used for the journal's own visual representation. The following study reveals the various reasons behind the art journal's reference to Soviet Constructivism which, within art critical discourse of the 1970s in the United States, point to a certain concept of the function of art and the critic in society and the particular understanding of historiography. Additionally, the very selective reference of Soviet Constructivism reveals *October* as a product of its age. After a time of rupture and hope in the late 1960s, the mid-1970s marked the beginning of a period characterized by a crisis of political agency, an expansion of capitalist accumulation, and a restoration of the class power of the rich, that is, neoliberalism.

Some have already pointed to the importance of Soviet Constructivism for *October* journal. Peter Muir, in *Against the Will to Silence*, considers the specific combination of artistic production and simultaneous critical reflection found in Constructivism a model for *October*. The journal *October*, he writes, aims to realize a similar combination. Muir also mentions the "grounding" function of Constructivism for the neo-avant-garde, albeit without further examining or explaining it.[3] Gwen Allen sees the homage to Sergei Eisenstein's film as a strategic positioning, interpreting this choice in terms of differentiation from a media-specific formalism.[4] Despite these observations, with which I concur, no one has thus far explained the prominent reference to Soviet Constructivism in detail and examined its function.

Emblematic Moment

The journal *October* associates with Soviet Constructivism a proper founding narrative. This narrative is repeated on multiple occasions by the editors and again invoked especially at anniversaries. The story is first told in "About October," a programmatic self-description published in the inaugural issue. The editors emphatically reiterate the unique-

ness of the period immediately following the Russian Revolution: “We have named this journal in celebration of that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique.”[5] *October*’s founders see this combination of art, theoretical reflection, and revolutionary political practice epitomized by Sergei Eisenstein’s film *October* (1918). For the new journal, “October” becomes a key point of reference for the future: “‘October’ [here meaning both the film and the October Revolution] is a reference which remains, for us, more than exemplary; it is instructive.”[6] In the manifesto-like text “About October,” one gets a sense of the overlap of actual historical events and their visual representation in Eisenstein’s film. Intellectually, both appear to be an important point of reference. In the introduction to the collection of essays published to mark the journal’s tenth anniversary, the founding story is repeated with some small enhancements. “But why *October*?” the editors rhetorically ask and then promptly provide the answer: “Briefly, *October* is named after Eisenstein’s film celebrating the tenth anniversary of the revolution. More fully, *October* is emblematic for us of a specific historical moment in which artistic practice joined with critical theory in the project of social construction.” In the introduction to the collection of essays, Eisenstein’s film—the visual representation of the revolution—becomes the central point of reference for the journal. While still relevant as a historical event in “About October,” the October Revolution has now faded away albeit. This shift in emphasis shows a consolidation of *October*’s focus on representation within the first ten years. In this perspective, the idea of revolution is primarily understood, interpreted, and explained through and within the framework of aesthetics. This is complemented by a subsequent clarification regarding the function of this reference to a period in the past. And it is here that Constructivism is mentioned for the first time: “Naming the journal *October* was not, however, a nostalgic gesture. We had no desire to perpetuate the mythology of the revolution. Rather we wished to claim that the unfinished, analytic project of Constructivism (…) was required for a consideration of the aesthetic practices of our own time.”[7] In this shift from a notion of “the real” to a “critique of representation,” Gail Day sees a particularly significant aspect of *October*’s orientation.[8]

In view of this central importance, as repeatedly underscored in the self-description, of the Soviet avant-garde and specifically of Constructivism, the journal published only a few essays on the subject in its first years. The first issue includes essays on film, a translation of Michel Foucault’s review of René Magritte, Rosalind Krauss writing on contemporary video art, and Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe comparing the novel *Gravity’s Rainbow* to Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*. Not one of the texts is devoted to Soviet Constructivism. The second issue includes two relevant contributions: Sergei Eisenstein’s work notes on his unfinished film *Capital* and an accompanying essay by Annette Michelson. The next essays on the subject appear only in the seventh issue. Even in the special issues—*October* published eleven of them in its first ten years—Soviet Constructivism is discussed only in passing. Just two of the special issues of the first decade are devoted to cultural production in the former Soviet Union. Tellingly, the focus of those two special issues is mainly on the reception of post-revolutionary art in the United States. Issue no. 7 on *Soviet Revolutionary Culture* (published in the winter of 1978) focuses on the Russia diaries Alfred H.

Barr kept during a journey to the Soviet Union in 1927–1928, and the second special issue, *Essays in Honor of Jay Leyda* (no. 11), published in the winter of 1979, is a Festschrift for Jay Leyda, the American filmmaker and film historian. An expert on Soviet revolutionary film, Leyda advised *October* on the subject on multiple occasions during its first years, supporting the magazine with his expertise. Yet he never published in *October* himself. Given its prominent role in the self-description, one only sporadically finds essays offering new research on Soviet Constructivism and its embeddedness in the sociopolitical situation of postrevolutionary Russia in *October*.

To this day in the self-representation the reference to Soviet Constructivism holds emblematic significance for *October*. Accordingly, the "celebration of that moment in history" supposedly signified by the name "October" is still regularly revived and reiterated today. In 2017—on the occasion of the centennial of the October Revolution—the significance of that historical moment for *October* is once again reiterated.[9] "About October," the self-description published in the first issue, is reprinted along with two essays originally published in *Artforum*: Annette Michelson's "From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov's *The Man with a Movie Camera*" (1972) and Rosalind Krauss's "Montage *October*: Dialectic of the Shot" (1973). Repeated again and again, still it remains unclear what exactly distinguishes this "moment in history" and what, specifically, is supposed to be "instructive" about Constructivism. Instead, the October Revolution and the constructivist movement emerging in its wake become an actual founding myth for the magazine and provide a particular symbolic framework. This framing function becomes even more obvious in the magazine's own visual representation. Along with Eisenstein's film, the film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) by Dziga Vertov is an important resource for the magazine's visual representation. In its very first issue (spring 1976), the back cover features the image of the eye with the emphatic, demanding gaze superimposed on the camera lens (a film still from Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*). Vertov's "eye" also adorns the cover of the *The First Decade*—a collection of essays published by the magazine in its first ten years—and serves as the central graphic element in a large poster with the heading "*October*. Twenty Years on the Cutting Edge," produced to mark the magazine's twentieth anniversary.

By referencing Soviet Constructivism, the founders of *October* bestow criticality and sociopolitical relevance on their magazine and the discourse they pursue. Symbolic references to radical ideas are a common practice of distinction in the visual arts. Radical ideas provide a symbolic surplus value and lend a player in the art field critical credibility.[10] By taking the revolutionary film of the young Soviet Union and giving it pole position in the symbolic framing of the new journal, the *October* protagonists secure the increased attention of their contemporaries—for one thing, because in critical theory a persistent hope was linked to the medium of film and its potential for mass agitation to become a vehicle for revolutionary transformation; and for another, because in the 1960s (especially in France) revolutionary Soviet film served as the starting point for an actualization of aesthetics and radical politics.[11] Furthermore, by holding onto the legacy and concept of the avant-garde, *October* makes clear that meaningful art cannot be light-footed. Something is at stake in it, and its concerns are political and groundbreaking. Finally,

October uses this founding narrative to excessively celebrate itself and its discursive project—to this day. Under the banner of a revolutionary spirit, the journal itself is staged and idealized as an art critical revolution.[12]

Rhetoric of Differentiation

In the United States in the 1970s, Soviet Constructivism was received predominantly in terms of formal-aesthetic aspects. In his 1967 book *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*, George Rickey read Constructivism as a movement primarily concerned with formal aesthetic questions. Rickey's intention was—similar to Alfred H. Barr's before him—to integrate the constructivist works into a Western canon of artistic developments and accord them a place in modern art history alongside their familiar European and American counterparts.[13] Just how uncommon a nonformalist, sociopolitical reading of Constructivism was in the mid-1970s is indicated by the fact that Christina Lodder's 1983 monograph on *Russian Constructivism* still presented the formalist interpretation as the dominant perspective against which to argue.[14] *October*'s change of focus—at least on a rhetorically representative level—to the sociopolitical embeddedness and the revolutionary ambitions of this artistic movement must therefore be seen as an attempt at dissociation from what at the time was still a widespread, purely formal-aesthetic approach. Among the artists of the Russian avant-garde, Sergei Eisenstein was, moreover, a controversial figure, viewed with skepticism both by Stalin in the Soviet Union and by Soviet dissidents in the West. Stalin saw Eisenstein as a formalist and his works as informed by subjectivism.[15] At the same time, Eisenstein remained in the Soviet Union even during Stalin's authoritarian rule. For this reason, liberal Soviet dissidents in the West accused him of collaborating with the totalitarian regime and having betrayed emancipatory values.[16]

By glorifying this filmmaker, in particular, and declaring the film *October* as "the summa of the silent Soviet film,"[17] the *October* founders forcefully opposed, as we will see, a schematic understanding of realism. At the same time, they dissociated themselves from what at the time was a dominant formalism. The programmatic affinity with the film *October* is part of a strategic distinction within the art critical field in the United States in the 1970s.

Under editor-in-chief John Coplans (1972–1977) and the increasing influence of Max Kozloff (who served as executive editor from 1975 until 1977), *Artforum*, for which Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and Jeremey Gilbert Rolfe worked before founding *October*, took a turn to the "left." Max Kozloff wanted *Artforum* to adopt a more political focus, especially by promoting a sociocritical realism. For Krauss, Michelson, and Gilbert Rolfe, this shift in the editorial direction was a principal reason to leave *Artforum* and found *October*.[18] This opposition against Kozloff's vision may have also led to the snide remark in "About October" that "For us, the argument regarding Socialist Realism is nonexistent."[19] On the other hand, the reference to Eisenstein's film *October* serves the purpose of dissociation from a self-referential formalism in the tradition of Clement Greenberg, which pre-

scribed a strict set of media-specific rules of making and viewing art and excluded any reference to political or popular culture content. Clement Greenberg was, moreover, a passionate advocate of the medium of painting. The technically mediated and reproducible medium of film that, through the reference to Eisenstein, came to provide the name for the journal is therefore diametrically opposed to the idea of original, unmediated artistic expression championed by Greenberg. At the same time, the cross-media perspective implied in this reference would be inconceivable for a formalistic approach à la Greenberg. An art magazine could not also discuss film, photography, literature, theater, video, dance, performance, and theory. Finally, in referring to Eisenstein's film, the *October* founders aligned themselves with a work commissioned to celebrate a recent political event. From a formalist point of view, such a direct political use of art would mean the loss of artistic autonomy.[20] Rosalind Krauss accordingly views Eisenstein's film as also dialectically transcending both a purely documentary and a formal-aesthetic approach. To the magazine's founders, Eisenstein's film *October* is thus exemplary for a socially oriented art that transcends realism and formalism and shows a third way. Then, according to Krauss, it is only in this dialectal transcendence that a truly revolutionary aesthetic is possible. One that disengages from factual reality and, in doing so, allows for a utopian perspective.[21]

Unfinished Possibilities

The *October* founders repeatedly draw parallels between the late 1920s, the period that saw the making of Eisenstein's *October* and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*, and their present, in the process identifying an ideological and political battlefield for the 1970s in the United States. Both moments—the late 1920s in the Soviet Union and the late 1970s in the United States—were said to be characterized by a fundamental transformation. Progressive social forces came under increasing pressure and were pushed back by reactionary tendencies. In the Soviet Union of the late 1920s, Stalin asserted his exclusive claim to power, and the United States in the 1970s were, as Annette Michelson saw it, increasingly dominated by the interests of large private corporations.[22] In making this analogy, *October* magazine saw itself in alliance with the Soviet constructivists and at odds with those reactionary developments: "we considered it [the art journal] the necessary response to what was once again a consolidation of reactionary forces within the political and cultural field."[23] As part of the analogy, a comparable turning point for art was assumed. To the *October* founders, the Russian Revolution and the movement of 1968 led in similarly fundamental ways to a wide range of artistic innovations. Yet both of those developments—of Soviet Constructivism, on the one hand, and the neo-avant-garde, on the other—remained unfinished: "We founded *October* as a forum for the presentation and theoretical elaboration of cultural work that continued the unfinished project of the 1960s."[24]

Eisenstein's film *October* paradigmatically epitomizes this "unfinishedness" and incompleteness with regard to Soviet Constructivism. For Eisenstein, *October* was, in fact, just a first step toward a much more comprehensive and ambitious project, as he was looking

to make a film about Karl Marx's *Capital*. As Michelson writes, the envisaged but never realized project would have established "the level and the mode of a truly revolutionary cinematic consciousness,"[25] representing a new stage in the continual radicalization of "a program for the development of the cognitive instrument in the service of revolutionary change."[26] The film *October* thus stands for an artistic vision not yet fully realized. This vision—the *Capital* film project is elaborated only in notes—is nowhere further specified by Michelson and Krauss, and it is especially in this open-ended, merely hinted-at form that it represents a potentiality for the future. They view art of the 1960s and their journal as following in the mold, and in terms of a, once again, merely partial realization of the potentiality inherent in Eisenstein (and, consequently, in Constructivism). On top of this, Eisenstein's film *October* marks a turning point, as it stands for the end of the artistically innovative postrevolutionary period and the onset of Stalin's authoritarian rule, which coincided with the expulsion of Leon Trotsky from the Communist Party in November 1927. Josef Stalin thereby once and for all decided the internal power struggle in his favor, a shift that also had a direct impact on the film *October*. As a result of Stalin's power grab, Eisenstein was forced to re-edit the film once more. He changed some scenes and scaled back the role of Trotsky in the revolutionary events. This is also why the film was only completed the year after the anniversary celebrations.[27] The film *October* thus represents, on the one hand, an artist's revolutionary aesthetic program that remained unfinished, while, on the other, it coincides with the onset of incipient repression by the state, thus marking, from the point of view of the journal *October*, the end of a period of innovative artistic efforts taken as a whole. Those efforts also remain "unfinished."

In drawing the parallel between the present and the situation in the Soviet Union in the late 1920s, the *October* founders contend that their position following Eisenstein is endangered and under threat. With this analogy, they add a sense of urgency to the discursive project they pursue with their journal and lend the project a certain dramatic quality. At the same time, they see themselves in the same mold as Soviet Constructivism and claim to be part of the progressive cultural avant-garde of their time. The journal *October* thus views its mission as providing a historical foundation for, and at the same time supporting, an expanded 1960s artistic practice that has been identified as the new avant-garde. In this construction, the *October* editors also secure a due place in art history for themselves and their magazine, as art history is understood in terms of a development driven by avant-garde transgressions. Consequently, the avant-garde is also invariably in conflict with its own present—which it must transcend, after all. Precisely by portraying itself as beleaguered and marginalized, *October* once more confirms its own claim to being part of the new avant-garde.

The reference to Soviet Constructivism by the *October* protagonists reveals a deep ambivalence. On the one hand, it shows a longing for a moment of social change and transgression on a historic scale. The *October* protagonists are convinced they have political agency and are part of a larger progressive project. Such a belief in the possibility of shaping and making history is rooted in what at the time was still a relevant experience of the political mass movement of the late 1960s in the United States and elsewhere. Therefore, in "About October" the reference to an actual revolution was still an option. On the

other hand, a deep skepticism regarding any concept of "the real" pervades *October*. This has led to the abandonment of the possibility of actual radical change, as the main reference of the journal's name after ten years is to the representation of the revolution.

This shift in emphasis is symptomatic of a deep sociopolitical change in the United States and beyond. The *October* protagonists already pointed to first indications of the transformation that would shape Western society for years to come: "We are now five years from that beginning [the launching the new journal], and the crisis which soon brought Carter to Washington has intensified, installing corporate might and its imperatives even more firmly in power. There are few among us who do not read the immediate future as a demonstration of the naked, brutal force of unrestrained corporate greed."[28] In the 1970s, the neoliberal offensive started. Neoliberalism has led to an expansion of capitalist accumulation, a conservative backlash, and an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the dominating class. One core action of neoliberal politics is to abolish all forms of institutionalized solidarity and attack and break all forms of united political action, especially organized labor. Official politics focus on supporting the private and the individual.[29] In New York, the effects and reality of neoliberal transformation were perceptible early on, as the city became a test case for what followed under the Reagan administration.[30] In a climate where governmental politics degenerates into serving private interests and where any form of organized political action is under attack, the possibility of radical change becomes utopian. That's why a radical political change was not a real option for the *October* protagonists like for many other critical intellectuals in the West at that time.

October Art History

The *October* protagonists also write about Soviet Constructivism in a way that shows they are interested less in the historical art movement in itself than in defining a starting point for their discursive project and establishing certain art historical narratives. In these narratives, the *October* authors interpret and assess the art of their time in back-referencing historical artistic approaches. Their main focus is on the art of their time, meaning the art of the 1960s and 1970s, with historical art—which, for *October*, means above all the historical avant-garde movements of Surrealism, Dada, and Soviet Constructivism—serving as a benchmark of sorts. The *October* authors do identify contemporary art in its unique character, and they explain it as part of a historical development, by relating it to art of the past. What precise purpose Soviet Constructivism serves in those art historical narratives is to be examined later.

To mark the twentieth anniversary of the journal *October*, a large poster was created by Alexander Ku. Intended for promotional purposes, the poster announces in all capital letters: "Twenty years on the cutting edge." Written above this in red lettering is the name of the journal. Listed further down, underneath the slogan "*October* explores new frontiers," are all publications edited by the *October* team. These include seventy-eight issues, the two anthologies *The First Decade* and *The Second Decade*, two portfolios with artists' editions (*October* portfolios), and, finally, all books published in the *October* book series.

This list of *October* brand products is followed by the contact information of MIT Press (which is responsible for the marketing and distribution of *October* journal and *October* books) and the call to "Get in on the conversation" with a subscription request form. This language-based solicitation is supported visually by a large-scale photomontage in the shape of a crescent or a sickle. On one side, the contour is broken up and the shape frays. The montage consists of fragmentary black-and-white images of artworks. It is a seemingly random selection of artistic practices discussed in *October*. Prominently featured in the center and looking straight at us is the wide-open eye superimposed on the camera lens from the Soviet revolutionary film *Man with a Movie Camera* by Dziga Vertov. Right above the eye are a conceptual work I am unable to identify, a sculpture by Robert Gober, and, further up, a photograph showing Andy Warhol with another person, and Gordon Matta-Clark's *Splitting* (1974). Below Vertov's eye are several film stills, a press photo of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, and a woman with a mask. The film *Man with a Movie Camera* is placed center stage in this arrangement (see Figure 2). It is the focal point and the central point of reference in the poster. While the other pictorial references are cropped and the individuals and essential image features are sometimes difficult to identify, Vertov's cine-eye (*kino-glaz*) in the middle can be conclusively identified. In terms of size, it is the largest element in the photomontage and serves as the starting point from which the montage is built upward and downward.

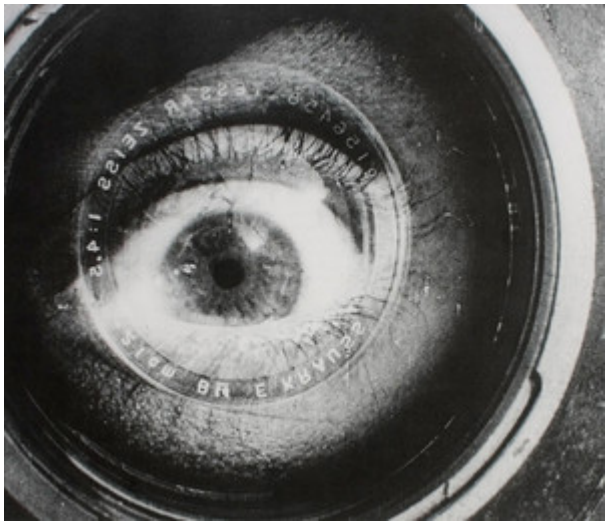

Figure 2 Dziga Vertov, *The Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929. Frame capture.

Clearly serving a promotional communicative function, the photomontage supports the matter-of-fact listing of *October* publications in a visually appealing way. The eye with its emphatic, frontal gaze directly addresses the viewer, immediately drawing attention to itself. At the same time, the montage also reflects the art historical approach of *October*: the historical avant-garde, represented here by Soviet Constructivism as embodied by Dziga Vertov and his film *Man with a Movie Camera*, becomes the central point of reference for the analysis and explanation of expanded, cross-genre art production in the postwar period. The second particular hallmark of *October*'s art historical approach, which is

featured in this poster, concerns Vertov's eye itself. This same eye is repeatedly and prominently used in *October*'s self-presentation—unlike other works of central importance to the *October* discourse, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) or Alexander Rodchenko's similarly pivotal three-part work *Pure Colors. Red, Yellow, Blue* (1921). To Annette Michelson, the film *Man with a Movie Camera*, from which the superimposed eye is taken, represents a "final" methodical leap. In this film, Vertov radicalizes for Michelson the analytical, constructivist film practice.[31] The design and the rhetoric of the anniversary poster symbolically link the eye from Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* to the judging art critical eye as represented by the journal *October*. What is implicitly asserted here is the model function of the process developed by Vertov in *Man with a Movie Camera* for the art critical practice of *October*.

Constructing Art Historical Narratives

The central importance, to *October*, of the historical avant-garde for art history in general and for the interpretation of art post-1945 is evident in the numerous essays on the subject that have been published in the journal. In "Grids" (issue no. 9, summer 1979) Rosalind Krauss focuses on the grid and shows how this structuring device introduced into art by the historical avant-garde (in this case, cubist painting and Mondrian) is appropriated and reinterpreted in postwar art (in this case, Ad Reinhardt and Agnes Martin). In "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting" (issue no. 16, 1981), Benjamin Buchloh examines the return of figurative representation in late 1920s and, especially, 1930s painting and its reduplication in the 1970s. The special issue titled *The Duchamp Effect* (issue no. 70, autumn 1994) focuses on Marcel Duchamp and his influence on expanded art production after 1960 (particularly conceptual art). In general, *October* protagonists see that certain approaches and aesthetical concepts developed by the historical avant-garde were taken up by art after 1945.[32] For some theorists (among others Peter Bürger) that postwar repetition of the artistic approaches developed by the historical avant-garde marks the end of a radical questioning of aesthetic and social conventions and the beginning of the historical avant-garde's integration into the institutions of art. The *October* protagonists instead criticize such a one-sided history of decline, calling into question the notion of an original, genuine, authentic avant-garde (i.e., the original one) and its false imitators (poor copies) after World War II. From the point of view of the *October* protagonists, the concept of the original needs to be challenged anyway and repetition may also be understood in the sense of a productive reworking and actualization of certain aesthetic issues.

In this historical rooting Soviet Constructivism is just one of a number of points of reference—in sharp contrast to its central role in the journal's self-presentation and the anniversary poster described earlier. Only in a few essays, Soviet Constructivism and its relation to postwar art is discussed explicitly. Two of these essays are "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde" (issue no. 37, summer 1986) by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh[33] and "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" (issue no. 70, autumn 1994) by Hal Foster.[34] In their approach, both these au-

thors reduce Soviet Constructivism to a very particular aesthetic paradigm, which they see developed in Alexander Rodchenko's *Pure Colors. Red, Yellow, Blue* (1921). And both Buchloh and Foster base their analysis on Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974) and accept his distinction between historical avant-garde and neo-avant-garde. [35]

In "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," Buchloh focuses on the "paradigm of monochrome painting" and examines its reception and transformation in postwar art. Monochrome painting, to Buchloh, is among the essential aesthetical paradigms developed by the historical avant-garde—along with the readymade, collage, serial grid compositions, and open construction. Rodchenko's triptych in the primary colors, *Pure Colors. Red, Yellow, Blue* (1921), is, to Buchloh, the first actual realization of the paradigm of the monochrome in art history. In monochrome painting there is no longer any discernible figure-ground relation, no color gradation, and no relational composition. As Buchloh argues, this reduction and the quasi-empirical laying bare of the medium's primary elements—pigments of the three primary colors on three discrete supports—amount to a radical demystification of aesthetic production, indeed, "the elimination of art's esoteric nature."[36] Buchloh suggests that by reducing the medium of painting to its primary physical properties, the monochrome paradigm also develops a radical critique of a bourgeois, idealistic understanding of art. Then Buchloh compares Rodchenko's *Pure Colors* with Yves Klein's *Monochrome und Feuer (Triptych)* (1961) and detects a structural shift in Klein's work. In Klein's *Monochrome und Feuer (Triptych)*, Buchloh argues the real meaning no longer resides in the work itself but is attributed to the work from outside, that is, by its reception, and projected onto it. To Buchloh, Klein's monochromes are—with regard to Yves Klein, Buchloh does agree with Bürger's history of decline—the diametric opposite of Rodchenko's approach of a conceptual transparence apparent in the work itself. Quite to the contrary, they invite being charged with symbolic and ideological significance, and Buchloh argues that, due to this idealizing character, they are a manifestation of the culture industry.[37]

As opposed to this history of decline, Hal Foster optimistically regards the project of a critique of art as an institution starting with the historical avant-garde as, in fact, having been realized for the first time in the neo-avant-garde. The historical avant-garde laid bare art's beholdenness to conventions, thereby putting it up for discussion. Foster sees this exemplified by Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and the very three canvases painted in primary colors by the Soviet constructivist Rodchenko. Following Buchloh's argument, Foster points out that Rodchenko had laid bare the very foundations (i.e., the conventions) of the medium of painting in this work. However, this critical reflection on media-specific conditions did not include the institutional context. To Foster, the latter came to be addressed only in the 1960s and is embodied in particular by four artists—Marcel Broodthaers, Daniel Buren, Michael Asher, and Hans Haacke. They are said to have expanded the critique of conventions put forward in the historical avant-garde to include the institutional dispositif. According to Foster, it was only with this expansion that the inherent critique of art as an institution in the historical avant-garde was properly realized.[38]

As the two essays show, Buchloh and Foster conceptualize the historical avant-garde based on particular aesthetic paradigms. As a result, the art movements are isolated from theirs specific historical and sociopolitical context and, turned into ahistorical, aesthetic-theoretical concepts, made available for a history of the development of art. In the case of Soviet Constructivism, this isolation from its historical circumstances is all the more problematic, as its goal was precisely to actively engage in the changed sociopolitical situation and participate in building a new communist society with their art. Art and communism were thought of together and the central issues for Soviet Constructivism were questions like: What is the function of art in a communist society? Does communist art exist and what does it look like?

Such questions are not of interest to the journal *October*. In *October*'s interpretation the focus lies on individual works and artists (almost all of them men) and collective aspects of the constructivist project have been left out. This very narrow understanding of Soviet Constructivism is the precondition for its incorporation into conclusive art historical narratives. The discussion of communism would go far beyond such a closed disciplinary perspective. Such a selective approach illustrated earlier on the basis of Buchloh's and Foster's essays is in clear contrast to the central placement of the film still from Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* in the photo montage described earlier. However, the illustration shows some key features of the particular historiography of art pursued by *October*: its insistence on discussing contemporary art in a historical perspective, holding on to the notion of the development of art and the possibility of fundamental shifts. The function of the art critic is thus to have the bigger picture in mind and, with his expertise and historical knowledge, to be able to distinguish between backward and progressive art. While entertaining its own idea of development in art, the *October* historiography of art wants to distance itself from a causal logic in history. Compared to traditional genealogies of art, the arrangement in the photomontage remains unsystematic.[39] The individual works are put together in a collage-like manner. There is no chronology. Nor can artistic influences, affinities, and strands of tradition be inferred. The montage does, however, make clear that the historical avant-garde—in the case of *October*, above all, Dadaism, Surrealism, and Constructivism—is the benchmark for the interpretation and assessment of postwar art. Only with the achievements of the historical avant-garde in mind can the postwar art be defined and explained in its uniqueness. And it is also in comparison to the former that it becomes possible to classify postwar art into "progressive" and "backward/reactionary" tendencies. The montage thus shows that the *October* protagonists are not really interested in Soviet Constructivism but, rather, in writing their own art history and, by extension, in securing its very place within history. Instead of holding on to the communist horizon and believing that actual historical change is possible, the *October* protagonists shifted their ambition. The belief in "making history" that was still relevant in the 1960s movement was now transformed into a "writing history" in a very literal sense.

Art Criticism with Vertov’s Eye?

Along with Eisenstein’s film *October*, the eye superimposed on a camera lens from Vertov’s film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) plays a prominent role in the self-representation of the journal. It can be found in the very first *October* issue (spring 1976), where it appears on the back cover. It also adorns the cover of *The First Decade*, *October*’s best-of anthology. And it is the central graphic element in the poster. To the *October* founders, this eye is a counterpart of sorts to Eisenstein’s film *October*. In this symbolic framing, Eisenstein’s film represents the idea of historical break and with the resulting radical innovations in art. Vertov’s eye, on the other hand, stands for a new methodological approach developed by Constructivism. This approach consists, as Michelson puts it, in a reflection on the medium and the use of linguistic concepts. With this interpretation, the *October* protagonists abandon Vertov’s belief in an objective reality and ignore the deeply materialist embedment of his filmic approach. Only through such a de-Marxification of Vertov, his analytical and at the same time emphatic fervent gaze could be used in *October*’s self-presentation and linked to its critical art-assessing eye.

For Michelson, Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* is a sophisticated and multilayered reflection on the medium of film, thus marking a qualitative leap in the history of film. In Michelson’s interpretation, Vertov wasn’t interested in a mere “mimesis” of the world but, rather, aspired to show the truth lying behind the appearances visible to the human eye and to visualize the “world of naked truth.” But that underlying truth can only be made visible by taking a step back from the world and focusing on the possibilities and inner logic of the medium.[40] This exposing of the truth, according to Michelson, is therefore realized by the constant disruptions of the filmic illusion.[41] Such disruptions are achieved by means of reverse motion, a chronological storyline reversal (i.e., what happens subsequently is shown first), through the use of trick techniques, and by showing moments of the production process of the film itself. By constantly crushing the illusionary space, for Michelson, a process of critical thinking, understanding, and political emancipation is activated. To Michelson, it is this decidedly medium-reflective approach that makes Vertov’s film innovative and radical.

Additionally, in *Man with a Movie Camera*, the use of linguistic concepts in Soviet revolutionary film becomes obvious for Michelson. Such a linguistic understanding of the medium of film, which is of prime importance among Soviet filmmakers and film theorists, is particularly evident in Vertov’s 1929 film. In it, Vertov made use of literary devices such as metaphorical references, similes, synecdoche, rhyming images, parataxis, and hysteron proteron. The seemingly random order of individual sequences and scenes, moreover, is viewed by Michelson not as a missing conceptual and thematic arc (this is what Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* was widely criticized for among contemporaries), but as a strategic use of anacoluthon, meaning a deliberate break of narrative strands. In Michelson’s interpretation, Vertov understands the medium of film in terms of language and accordingly treats it subversively with linguistic means.[42]

Michelson's interpretation moves Vertov's approach away from the world and locates it in the medium itself. In doing so, Michelson is not interested in discussing what the film actually shows. In her approach, what is shown is negligible, as it only serves to lay bare the medium's potentiality. What is shown is considered to be just a means to an end. Something essential is left aside in such a perspective. The film *Man with a Movie Camera* is an emphatic call for filmmakers to go out into the world and get involved in everyday life: "We engage directly in the study of the phenomena of life that surround us. We hold the ability to show and elucidate life as it is, considerably higher than the occasionally diverting doll games that people call theater, cinema, etc."[43] *Man with a Movie Camera* brings together countless everyday situations, processes, and actions. For Vertov the deliberate use of the medium's possibilities is not, in fact, an end in itself. Instead, it is meant to provide a deeper understanding of the spirit, the dynamics, and the optimism prevailing at that time. Through his elaborated montage technique, he would try to convey a sense of the collective, communist spirit: "To see and hear life, to note its turns and turning points, to catch the crunch of the old bones of everyday existence beneath the press of the Revolution, to follow the growth of the young Soviet organism, to record and organize the individual characteristics of life's phenomena into a whole, an essence, a conclusion—this is our immediate objective."[44] Such an endeavor reveals a positive view of the masses. In *Man with a Movie Camera*, the masses are shown neither in their chaotic and uncontrollable form (like in the scenes of the workers' uprising in Fritz Lang's 1927 film *Metropolis*) nor in their homogenized and heteronomous form under a totalitarian order (like in Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 *Triumph des Willens*). In *Man with a Movie Camera* (like in Eisenstein's *October*), the masses are shown as a force capable of defining and creating a new order.[45]

Furthermore, *Man with a Movie Camera* provides insights into a different understanding of the relation between human and things, the worker/artist and the means of production. In the dynamic of collective aspiration, humans are working with the machines, things and resources side by side. It is no longer a relation of domination. The humans do not dominate things and nature, imposing their will on them. Nor do the machines give the beat and the workers have to follow, as is the case in capitalist society. The communist relation between people and things/machines visualized in the film *Man with a Movie Camera* is an emancipated one. Man and machine are no longer alien to one another, as their relationship becomes one of trust and reliance. The eye superimposed on a camera lens perfectly captures this idea. The interlinking of the artistic/human eye and the technical apparatus/machine is all about giving up domination and cultivating the mutual trust. In this kind of emancipated relationship between artist and means of production, Vertov sees a powerful resource for aesthetic innovation: "Aiding the machine-eye is the kinok-pilot, who not only controls the camera's movement, but entrusts himself to it during experiments in space. And at a later time the kinok-engineer, with remote control of cameras. The result of this concerted action of the liberated and perfected camera and the strategic brain of man directing, observing, and gauging—the presentation of even the most ordinary things will take on an exceptionally fresh and interesting aspect."[46] The entire film

is a representation of mutual understanding and cooperation of humans and machines in communist society.

Michelson's interpretation of *Man with a Movie Camera*—that is, the medium-reflective approach and understanding of art in terms of language—reveals the intellectual constellation from which the *October* journal arises. Media-specific self-reflection, which for Clement Greenberg had still led to the self-sufficiency of pure painting, becomes for *October* an inquiry into media conditions, with the aim of disrupting the illusionistic or auratic space of art. The *October* protagonists construe this disruption from a logic intrinsic to the work itself. This is exemplified by Michelson's reading of Vertov as well as by the essays of Buchloh and Foster. Still clearly recognizable for all its expansion, the individual and distinct artwork remains the central point of reference. Singularity is the leading idea. The concept of the collective is not of relevance in their analysis. Furthermore, though the analysis offers occasional glimpses of the specific contemporary social and cultural context (especially in the case of Buchloh and Foster), there is no more belief in the possibility of a radical change of the given status quo. The second aspect, the linguistic focus Michelson discerns in *Man with a Movie Camera*, is central to *October* itself, as the art journal is representative of a linguistic turn in American art criticism. That turn has been described as the element that makes the *October* a postmodern project and allows it to call into question the Greenbergian idea of pure visuality and the autonomy of the work. [47]

In all these respects—no idea of a collective, detaching cultural production from its specific historical embedment, understanding art as an autonomous sign system—the *October* journal exemplifies the ideological shift that took place in the 1970s. Under the then emerging neoliberal order, "ephemerality and fragmentation take precedence over eternal truths and unified politics, and explanations have shifted from the realm of material and political-economic groundings towards a consideration of autonomous cultural and political practices."[48] Under these historical conditions in which *October* was constituted, revolution and communism became unthinkable. Instead, the capitalist accumulation (in *October* often understood as corporate interests and the art market) seems to extend and gradually pervade various aspects of life, while the ruling classes reestablish their power and privileges.

In conclusion, we can state that Soviet Constructivism is received in a very selective manner by the journal *October*. To *October*, this reception is more about itself than about a new understanding of the historical artistic movement or a reevaluation of the issues it raised for art post-1945. Accordingly, the apparent crescent or sickle shape of the photomontage on the anniversary poster is not a reference to the hammer and sickle of communism, but actually one half of the letter "O"—an "O" whose shape actually resembles the typography of the name of the journal, *October*. This means that the historical reference is made to fit into the journal's own point of view/name. Everything is linked to the journal's own discursive project and the objective is, in fact, to construct an art history of its own. Thus, Soviet Constructivism is literally cut to fit *October*.

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Notes:

(1.) Peter Muir, *Against the Will to Silence: An Intellectual History of the American Art Journal October Between 1976 and 1981* (Liverpool, UK: John Moores University, 2003).

Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

(2.) In its first years the journal *October* was institutionally affiliated with the Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York. With the magazine *Oppositions*, IAUS also published an important discussion platform for postmodern architectural theory.

(3.) Muir, *Against the Will*, 26 and 71–73.

(4.) Gwen Allen, *Artists' Magazines. An Alternative Space for Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 28.

(5.) The Editors, "About October," *October* 1 (1976): 3–5, 3.

(6.) The Editors, "About October," 4.

(7.) Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec, "Introduction," in *October: The First Decade 1976–1986* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), ix.

(8.) Day, *Dialectical*, 132–149.

(9.) Rachel Churner, "October before 'October'," *October* 162 (2017): 108–111.

(10.) Marina Vishmidt, "The Cultural Logic of Criticality," *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 3 (2008): 253–269.

(11.) Trevor Stark, "'Cinema in the Hands of the People': Chris Marker, the Medvedkin Group, and the Potential of Militant Film," *October* 139 (2012): 117–150. James Roy MacBean, "Godard and the Dziga Vertov Group: Film and Dialectic," *Film Quarterly* 26 (1972): 30–44.

(12.) This self-stylization by the magazine is at times also gladly accepted by research. See, for example, Gerald Geilert, *October-Revolution in der amerikanischen Kunstkritik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2009).

(13.) George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (New York: G. Braziller, 1967).

(14.) Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

(15.) Rosalind Krauss, "Montage 'October': Dialectic of the Shot," *October* 162 (2017): 133–144, 134. This essay was first published in *Artforum* 11, no. 5 (January 1973): 61–65.

(16.) Annette Michelson, "A Specter and Its Specter," *October* 7 (1978): 3–6, 5.

(17.) Editors, "About October," 3.

(18.) Gregory Gilbert and Richard Paley, "An Interview with Rosalind Krauss," *Rutgers Art Review* 11 (1990): 53–68, 58.

(19.) Editors, “About October,” 4.

(20.) Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5–22.

(21.) Krauss, “Montage ‘October’,” 143.

(22.) Annette Michelson, “The Prospect before Us,” *October* 16 (1981): 119–126, 119.

(23.) Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec, “Introduction,” in *October: The First Decade 1976–1986* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), ix–xii, ix.

(24.) Ibid.

(25.) Annette Michelson, “Reading Eisenstein Reading ‘Capital’,” *October* 2 (1976): 26–38, 29.

(26.) Ibid., 35.

(27.) Krauss, “Montage ‘October’,”134.

(28.) Michelson, “The Prospect,” 119.

(29.) David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

(30.) Ibid., 44–48.

(31.) Annette Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist: Vertov’s ‘The Man with a Movie Camera’,” *October* 162 (2017): 112–132, 119. This essay was first published in *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (March 1972): 60–72.

(32.) Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

(33.) Benjamin Buchloh, “The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde,” *October* 37 (1986): 41–52.

(34.) Hal Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?,” *October* 70 (1994): 5–32.

(35.) Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 53–63.

(36.) Buchloh, “The Primary Colors,” 44.

(37.) Buchloh, “The Primary Colors,” 50.

(38.) Foster, “What’s Neo,” 31.

(39.) For genealogical mappings in art and art history, see Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt, *Stammbäume der Kunst. Zur Genealogie der Avantgarde* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2005).

(40.) Michelson, “From Magician to Epistemologist,” 120.

(41.) Ibid., 128.

(42.) Ibid., 124.

(43.) Dziga Vertov, “Artistic Drama, and Kino-Eye,” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 47.

(44.) Ibid.

(45.) Lukas German, *Die Wirklichkeit als Möglichkeit. Das revolutionäre Potential filmischer Ästhetik* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2016), 68–73.

(46.) Vertov, “Artistic Drama,” 19.

(47.) Muir, *Against the Will*, 17.

(48.) David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), 328.

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